# UK farmers face historic confidence lows amid funding cuts and policy turmoil



The ongoing struggle of UK farmers amid significant policy changes and financial pressures has sparked growing concern within the agricultural community. Recent government measures, such as the abrupt cuts to the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and the suspension of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), have left many farmers feeling abandoned and uncertain about their future. The government’s halt of the SFI in March was particularly damaging, abruptly stalling efforts crucial to transitioning towards more environmentally sustainable practices.

Farmers of all sizes and types are being called upon to contribute to ecological restoration and climate resilience. However, research shows that the £2.5 billion currently allocated to the farming budget falls short of what is necessary to repair vital ecosystems, including soils and rivers. A significant reduction in this funding would threaten the government's already ambitious targets for wildlife recovery, leaving farmers without adequate means to adapt to the dramatic changes brought on by climate alterations and market instabilities. The reliance on private financing or sporadic funding from other governmental sources only adds to the climate of uncertainty.

Minette Batters, in her final column for Country Life, highlighted similar frustrations faced by the agricultural sector. Taking on a leadership role in a comprehensive review of farming profitability for the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), she expressed the need for improved support and a strategic approach to the challenges posed by the transition from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy to new environmental schemes. Batters underscored the flaws in the current system, including inefficient funding and a lack of integrated food education that has been successful in other nations.

The National Farmers Union (NFU) has reported a notable decline in business confidence within the farming community, plunging to an all-time low. Schools of thought within the NFU express skepticism about the government's commitment to maintaining food security amid rising pressures from agricultural imports. Reports indicate that a stark 86% of farmers anticipate that reductions in EU subsidies will have a detrimental impact on their livelihoods, with devastating weather conditions compounding the issue.

In a striking demonstration of discontent, thousands of farmers brought their tractors to Parliament in March, voicing their opposition to post-Brexit trade deals that they believe threaten their livelihoods. Protesters conveying messages about substandard imports have highlighted their concerns over biosecurity and market fairness, calling for policy changes that support domestic producers.

Meanwhile, an evolving dynamic in land use is emerging, as initiatives for rewilding gain traction alongside discussions around sustainable farming. The practice of restoring farmland to its natural state is increasingly financially viable due to government incentives and market frameworks intended to fulfil biodiversity net gain requirements. Yet, controversial questions persist regarding the implications for food production and whether this shift can coexist with the crucial demands of food security.

As the sector grapples with these multifaceted challenges, a shift in political allegiance among farmers appears imminent. Long-standing support for the Conservative Party is waning in the face of perceived neglect, leading many to consider alternative parties. Farmers are debating their future engagement with political programmes that have yet to satisfactorily address the profound changes affecting their livelihoods and the agricultural landscape.

Ultimately, UK farmers find themselves at a crossroads, seeking not only immediate relief and strategic support but also a long-term vision that integrates robust ecological practices with food security. Only through a concerted effort, encompassing coherent policy reform and viable funding mechanisms, can the farming community navigate the turbulent waters ahead.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/blog/vicki-hird/what-happens-if-there-are-cuts-nature-friendly-farming-support), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/646f944b-54bb-4b7f-9b6f-36d0a1e9ec43)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/blog/vicki-hird/what-happens-if-there-are-cuts-nature-friendly-farming-support), [[2]](https://www.countrylife.co.uk/comment-opinion/minette-batters-it-would-be-wrong-to-turn-my-back-on-the-farming-sector-in-its-hour-of-need)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/646f944b-54bb-4b7f-9b6f-36d0a1e9ec43), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/4a36f9038c02e3187569a2304408dba4), [[6]](https://www.ft.com/content/fefc333b-b1e7-4b47-ac90-864adf6f82a4)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/4a36f9038c02e3187569a2304408dba4), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/e28b3277-5b63-4a65-898a-f9debf7ecd53)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.ft.com/content/fefc333b-b1e7-4b47-ac90-864adf6f82a4)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/blog/vicki-hird/what-happens-if-there-are-cuts-nature-friendly-farming-support> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.countrylife.co.uk/comment-opinion/minette-batters-it-would-be-wrong-to-turn-my-back-on-the-farming-sector-in-its-hour-of-need> - Minette Batters, in her final column for Country Life, announces her decision to lead a six-month review on farming profitability for Defra Secretary Steve Reed. Acknowledging the government's limited support for farming and the challenges ahead, Batters emphasizes her commitment to agriculture, especially amidst the sector’s current crisis. She critiques the handling of the UK’s transition from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy to the Environmental Land Management schemes, specifically the flawed design and recent closure of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) program. Batters highlights issues such as lack of funding caps, insufficient forward planning, and inconsistent support across UK regions, leading to inefficiencies and significant budget underspend returned to the Treasury. She also voices concern over the lost opportunity to integrate food education into schools, drawing on successful international models. Additionally, Batters celebrates her new role as honorary president of the Farming Community Network and shares positive news from her own farm, including passing a TB test, healthy spring planting, and the launch of local flower deliveries. Her column underscores her enduring dedication to the farming community and the need for coherent, inclusive agricultural policy reform. ([countrylife.co.uk](https://www.countrylife.co.uk/comment-opinion/minette-batters-it-would-be-wrong-to-turn-my-back-on-the-farming-sector-in-its-hour-of-need?utm_source=openai))
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/646f944b-54bb-4b7f-9b6f-36d0a1e9ec43> - The UK National Farmers Union (NFU) has reported a significant decline in business confidence among UK farmers, reaching an all-time low. Challenges such as record rainfall, high input costs, and the transition to a new farming subsidy scheme have severely impacted food production. The NFU’s new president, Tom Bradshaw, criticized the government's approach to food security, highlighting the risks of over-reliance on imports. A survey revealed that 65% of farmers are experiencing declining profits or foresee their business failing. Additionally, 86% believe phasing out EU subsidies will negatively impact their operations. Amid these struggles, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s pledge to maintain homegrown food levels at 60% is viewed skeptically by farmers. The political landscape could shift, with rural communities feeling "politically homeless," potentially affecting the Conservative party's rural seats. The NFU warned of losing family farms, which are vital to rural economies. Climate change-induced extreme weather, including the wettest 18 months since 1836, has drastically affected crop conditions and planting. ([ft.com](https://www.ft.com/content/646f944b-54bb-4b7f-9b6f-36d0a1e9ec43?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://apnews.com/article/4a36f9038c02e3187569a2304408dba4> - On March 25, 2024, UK farmers drove a convoy of tractors to Parliament in London to protest post-Brexit rules and trade deals that they claim threaten their livelihoods and food security. Organized by campaign groups Save British Farming and Fairness for Farmers of Kent, the protest saw tractors flying Union Jack flags and carrying signs like “Stop substandard imports.” The protesters argue that post-Brexit trade agreements with countries like Australia and New Zealand allow for cheap imports that undercut British producers. They also criticize labeling practices and delayed import checks, which they believe compromise biosecurity. Organizer Liz Webster called for a policy overhaul and an exit from detrimental trade deals, emphasizing public support for maintaining high food standards and supporting local producers. The protest highlights the challenges UK farmers face in the wake of Brexit, contrasting with similar large-scale farmers' protests across the European Union. ([apnews.com](https://apnews.com/article/4a36f9038c02e3187569a2304408dba4?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/e28b3277-5b63-4a65-898a-f9debf7ecd53> - Rewilding, the process of restoring farmland to natural habitats, is gaining popularity in the UK, driven by both ecological passion and emerging financial incentives. Prominent cases such as Tatjana Greil Castro's estate in Suffolk and Rachel Evatt's project in the Peak District highlight transformations in biodiversity following restoration. These projects have been inspired by books like "Wilding" and are supported by government initiatives including funding for woodland creation and Countryside Stewardship schemes. Financially, rewilding is increasingly viable due to habitat restoration payments that can exceed traditional arable farming earnings. The government's Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) initiative, requiring developers to offset environmental impact, is expected to generate a significant market. Despite this, challenges including the complexity and long-term obligations of BNG contracts, high unit prices, and lack of regulatory infrastructure, hinder market growth. Some, like Julia Davies, are advancing rewilding through philanthropic land-lending models. However, concerns persist over the impact of removing land from food production, and rewilders are exploring regenerative farming models to produce nutrient-rich food sustainably. As rewilding expands, questions remain about balancing ecological restoration with food security and socio-economic inclusivity in access to these opportunities. ([ft.com](https://www.ft.com/content/e28b3277-5b63-4a65-898a-f9debf7ecd53?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/fefc333b-b1e7-4b47-ac90-864adf6f82a4> - Farmers in England are reconsidering their traditional support for the Conservative Party due to dissatisfaction with the government's handling of post-Brexit agricultural policies. Upland sheep and beef farmer Richard Pedley highlights the significant reduction in EU subsidies, now only a third of their previous amount, and the lack of adequate support from the new Environmental Land Management scheme. Farmers feel abandoned and economic pressures have mounted, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. With 8,000 farming businesses closing since 2019 and a 5% drop in agricultural businesses, discontent has grown. Conservative vote shares in rural areas have diminished, with Labour gaining ground. Farmers oppose trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, fearing competition with lower-standard imports. Labour promises to streamline funding, but farmers are skeptical, with some favoring the Lib Dems and Reform Party instead. ([ft.com](https://www.ft.com/content/fefc333b-b1e7-4b47-ac90-864adf6f82a4?utm_source=openai))